

DRS Teamwork Brightens Holidays For GIs

The goal was a simple one: “To put a smile on a soldier’s face,” as Judy Easter says.

That it happened 47 times over and involved most of the employees of the Department of Rehabilitative Services in Richmond speaks to the spirit of teamwork the agency displayed over the holiday season.

Mrs. Easter, who works in DRS’s fiscal office, is the sister of two GIs who have been stationed in Iraq since the war began last March. One brother has returned to the U.S., but CW2 Garland Goldman, attached to the 4th Infantry Division and stationed in Baghdad, was going to spend the holiday season in the war zone.

His sister started pulling together a “care package” for her 36-year-old sibling when a co-worker volunteered to add some additional items. An e-mail later to her colleagues in fiscal resulted in three boxes of food, t-shirts, lip balm, toiletries and other small gifts being collected for the soldiers in CW2 Goldman’s outfit.

The outpouring of support for the soldiers prompted Mrs. Easter and her DRS colleagues to “adopt” the unit for the holidays. Guided by gift lists supplied by the soldiers, DRS staffers donated DVDs, CDs, electric razors, board games and even a Dr. Seuss book for a GI’s child, and along with toiletries, magazines and food, mailed eight boxes to the troops in time for the holiday season.



Members of the 1-8 Infantry Battalion, 4th Infantry Division, enjoyed a holiday filled with gifts from employees at the Department of Rehabilitative Services, whose fiscal department, below, organized the collecting of gifts.



“Within a four-week period, we sent 13 boxes [of gifts] to our soldiers,” Mrs. Easter said. “We came together as a team to do something for others. It was rewarding to watch the boxes overflow.”

Perhaps the most heartening aspect of the activity was the response from the soldiers themselves.

“This letter has been the most difficult letter I have ever had to write,” one soldier wrote. “I don’t think there are enough ways to say ‘thank you.’ I also don’t feel that a letter can do any justice for what you have done for me.”

Another GI wrote: “It means a lot to us knowing that there are people back home praying for our safe return and doing things like a gift for soldiers program.”

“We wanted to show that we care about them, we support them and we have not forgotten them,” Mrs. Easter said. “We believe the mission was accomplished. Nothing can replace the joy we felt taking on this project.”

Veterans Services Focus of New Agency

What was once a patchwork of separate entities serving Virginians who are veterans of military service became a consolidated agency on New Year’s Day, offering veterans and their families access to a range of services and benefits available from the Federal government.

Access to those federal services and benefits “may save the state money by encouraging veterans to use federal veteran benefits rather than state services,” said Jon Mangis, the new Commissioner of the Department of Veterans Services, who came to Virginia from Oregon where he held a similar statewide veterans post.



Job fairs sponsored by the Department of Veterans Services , such as this one at John Tyler Community College, will be held around Virginia to alert veterans to benefits they may be eligible for.

Federal veterans benefits “are big money,” Mr. Mangis continued. He noted that Virginia veterans or their survivors receive over \$800 million annually.

Virginia’s veteran population is 780,000, but literally thousands of veterans are unaware of the medical and other benefits to which they may be entitled, Mr. Mangis said.

“We can do better providing easier access to claims officers,” he said, noting that the new agency will begin an enhanced outreach effort to notify veterans of the services available from the state.

“Federal [veterans’ benefits] applications are not user

friendly,” the director said. “When you’re talking about some folks with limited educations, particularly among World War II and Korean veterans, federal forms are

rather confusing. If the forms are filled out wrong the claim may be denied or unnecessarily delayed.

“We’re here to act as the veteran’s advocate. Most people don’t have a clue as to the benefits they’re entitled to. We’re here to help them work their claim, not to tell a person they don’t have a claim. Our only job is to help veterans.”

Mr. Mangis said the agency’s claims officers “are excellent at taking the [federal] Veterans Administration to task. We’ve also been successful at appealing claims that initially had been denied by the federal VA.”

As part of the outreach effort, the agency has developed plans for a series of job fairs to better inform veterans of services available, including access to state employment information.

The reorganization completed in January consolidated the operations of the Veterans Care Center in Roanoke, the Veterans Cemetery in Amelia County, the claims operation and the Department of Veterans Affairs. This was accomplished in response to claims by veterans that the previous structure was “too fragmented,” the director said.

“What was needed was a person ultimately located in Richmond to represent the veterans of the state,” Mr. Mangis said. “The Governor was very supportive of that concept.”

On the horizon are two additional initiatives – building a second veterans cemetery in Suffolk County to serve veterans and their families in Eastern Virginia and federal support for a second veterans care center at the McGuire Veterans Hospital in Richmond.

Virginia’s veterans, who make up over 11 percent of the state’s population, have a revamped state agency looking out for their needs, Mr. Mangis said. “We were hired to work for them.”

For further information about the department, visit its Web site at <http://www.vdva.vipnet.org/>

Veterans Cemetery Offers Perpetual Care

The Virginia Veterans Cemetery in Amelia County, set among 129 acres of rolling hills, is the final resting place for over 860 veterans and, in some cases, their spouses or children.

The cemetery, which opened in 1997, offers veterans and their eligible family members a gravesite, grave marker and perpetual care for those who qualify. A second veterans cemetery is slated to open in Suffolk County later this year.

To be eligible for interment, veterans must have been discharged from active duty under conditions other than dishonorable or undesirable, be retired from military service or die on active duty.

Qualifying veterans need a copy of their DD214 at the time of application and assistance is available to obtain a copy from the Records Management Center in St.



Louis. Veterans applying must be a current resident of Virginia or had initial entry into service from Virginia.

Other veterans may also qualify, including reservists, ROTC members, merchant seamen from World War II and any U.S. citizen who served in the armed services of any government allied with the U.S. during wartime. Forms are available from the Department of Veterans Services, 900 E. Main St., Richmond, VA 23219 or contact the cemetery staff at (804) 561-1475.

Health Benefits Contracts Awarded

Five companies were awarded two-year contracts in early January by the State Health Benefits Program for administering or providing health care benefits. The contracts are for medical and surgical, dental, prescription drug and mental health, substance abuse and employee assistance program services effective July 1, 2004 and serving 156,000 state employees and their families.

“Changes will occur only in the way some benefits are administered,” said Mary Habel, director of the state and local health benefits programs for the Department of Human Resource Management. “No changes are planned to health benefits coverage, including deductibles, copayments or coinsurance. However, benefits could be altered by the 2004 General Assembly.”

Medical and surgical services

Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Richmond will continue to administer the statewide COVA Care health plan. Currently, Anthem administers medical and surgical, along with prescription drug, dental, vision and hearing benefits. Kaiser Permanente has been awarded the contract for a fully insured regional HMO plan and will continue to provide these services to employees and family members in the Northern Virginia area.

Dental benefits

Delta Dental Plan of Virginia, based in Roanoke, will be the new administrator of dental benefits beginning July 1, replacing Anthem. Delta Dental has an extensive network of almost 2,500 dentists in 3,300 offices throughout Virginia. Most employees’ dentists should be in the Delta Dental statewide network, called DeltaPremier, although there could be exceptions.

Employees who want to determine if their dentist is in the network can go to the Delta Dental Web site at www.deltadentalva.com and follow the instructions to search for a dentist. Enter DeltaPremier for the name of the plan, write in the appropriate zip code and then the name of the dentist. A toll-free number also will be available at the time of spring Open Enrollment. Under the Commonwealth’s dental program, employees may also visit an out-of-network dentist but risk paying more for services.

Services for mental health, substance abuse and employee assistance

ValueOptions, Inc., of Norfolk will administer mental health, substance abuse and employee assistance program (EAP) services beginning July 1. As the nation’s largest privately held behavioral health care company, ValueOptions manages a national network of 80,000 practitioner locations and 10,000 facilities, including 2,051 Virginia

providers. Employees will access services in the same way they currently do, calling a toll-free number and visiting a designated Web site that will be available at Open Enrollment this spring. Magellan Behavioral Health of Columbia, Md., is the current administrator of mental illness, substance abuse and EAP services.

Prescription drug program benefits

Medco Health Solutions, Inc., of Franklin Lakes, N.J., will continue to manage the Commonwealth's retail pharmacy network and administer prescription drug benefits directly for the state program starting July 1. Medco's home delivery (mail service) pharmacy is based in Richmond. Currently, prescription drug benefits are administered by Anthem, through a subcontract with Medco.

State employees will receive additional information on benefits and monthly premiums this spring prior to the Open Enrollment period.

Last year, total expenses for the state health benefits program were \$532 million, representing payment of claims for state employees and covered family members, and plan administration.

In making its award selections, DHRM used objective criteria to evaluate all 18 proposals and held face-to-face negotiations with the four finalists. The criteria used included organization and financial stability; qualifications of staff, network service and quality; provider network and mail order pharmacy service and quality (for the prescription drug program); administrative capability; benefit cost management and administrative cost; and participation of small, women-owned and minority-owned businesses.

For answers to Frequently Asked Questions on the contract awards, go to www.dhrm.state.va.us.

Diabetes & You: Take Five Small Steps to Prevent Diabetes

Almost 16 million Americans are well on their way to developing diabetes - and most don't even know it. They have a condition called pre-diabetes, which means their blood glucose levels are higher than normal, but not yet diabetic. The good news is there is now scientific proof that they can delay or prevent the disease and its devastating complications.

The key to diabetes prevention is taking small steps toward living a healthier life. Everyone can benefit from the rewards of avoiding diabetes and its serious complications.

Here are five small steps you can take today to live a healthier life and prevent or delay diabetes:

1. **Find out if you are at risk.** The first step is to find out if you are at risk for diabetes or if you have pre-diabetes. Talk to your health care provider at your next visit.
2. **Set realistic goals.** You don't have to knock yourself out to delay or prevent diabetes. Start by making small changes. For example, try to get 15 minutes of physical activity a day this week. Each week add five minutes until you build up to the recommended 30 minutes a day, most days.

3. **Make better food choices.** Try to eat more fruits and vegetables (five to nine servings a day), beans, and grains. Reduce the amount of fat in your diet. Choose grilled or baked foods instead of fried.

4. **Record your progress.** Write down everything you eat and drink. Keeping a food diary is one of the most effective ways to lose weight and keep it off. Review this diary with your health care provider.

5. **Keep at it.** Making even modest lifestyle changes can be tough in the beginning. Try adding one new healthy change a week. Always get back on track, even if you fall off a few times. The key is just to keep at it.

Note: The CommonHealth wellness program will begin a focus on diabetes education later this spring. See the CommonHealth Compass or visit the CommonHealth Web site at www.chp-online.com/commonhealth for more information.

Clock Ticking On Purchase Of Prior Service At Reduced Rate Through VRS

Only a few months remain for most state employees eligible to purchase prior service credit to take advantage of the reduced rate of 5 percent of salary or average final compensation (AFC).

After July 1, 2004, the cost of purchasing service credit jumps to the actuarial equivalent rate, which could be as much as nine times the 5 percent rate.

The only exception is refunded service, which can still be purchased at 5 percent after June 30, 2004. Refunded service must be purchased, however, within three years of being rehired into a VRS position in order to pay for it through payroll deduction. After three years, the service must be purchased in a lump-sum payment.

Service credits can be purchased for a variety of types of service, including military service, refunded service, leave for birth or adoption of a child, civilian service in the federal government, purchases using accumulated sick leave and service not reported by employer.

As an example of the difference in cost between the 5 percent rate and the actuarial rate, consider this scenario: A person making \$42,000 who wishes to purchase service credit at the 5 percent rate would pay \$175 per month to purchase up to 48 months of service. That same person would pay an actuarial rate of \$1,027.41 per month to purchase the same service credit after June 30.

Individuals wishing to purchase service credit through a payroll deduction can buy prior service at the 5 percent rate after June 30, but only if the contract is renewed annually within 30 days of expiration until the purchase is complete.

Go to www.varetire.org to learn more about purchase of prior service.



CVC Donations Increase Over 2002 Totals



Virginia state employees bucked the recent national trend of depressed charitable giving and have contributed more than \$3.3 million to the employee-run Commonwealth of Virginia Campaign (CVC) for 2003.

Governor Mark R. Warner, honorary campaign chairman, lauded the efforts of state employees to help others. "This once again shows the commitment of state employees to their communities and Commonwealth," the Governor said. "I am very proud of the work the volunteer coordinators did this year and prouder still of the willingness my colleagues in state government have shown to help those in need throughout Virginia and beyond."

Over 1,000 non-profit organizations have qualified to receive earmarked CVC contributions for a range of services from cancer research to historic preservation. A committee of state employees annually screens each organization before it is approved.

Janet Brooking, state campaign director, suggested that the increase in employee giving, both in terms of individual contributions and the number of contributors, could be tied to the aftereffects of Hurricane Isabel in September, shortly before the 2003 campaign began.

"I think people saw how so many of these organizations helped their neighbors or themselves through a really horrible time," she said. "The volunteer work done after the hurricane truly represented this year's CVC theme of 'Lend a Helping Hand.'"

Virginia Public Service Week Salutes Outstanding Efforts Of State Employees

Virginia Public Service Week (VPSW), to be observed May 3-9, marks the fourth year a select group of state employees will be honored for their contributions to the Commonwealth.

This year's theme "Proudly Serving Virginians" emphasizes the service aspect of public employment. Six individuals and a team will receive Governor's Awards for outstanding achievement during their public service careers.

Governor Mark R. Warner is tentatively scheduled to present the awards at a noon reception at the Executive Mansion on Wednesday, May 5.

Thirty-five "Ambassadors" chosen at random from around the state will also be invited to the event to represent the state workforce and offer congratulations to the award recipients.

As in past years, the Virginia Credit Union will help sponsor the awards program.

Only agency heads can nominate employees for a Governor's Award. Full details about the awards program, the Governor's Award nominating form and the Ambassador sign-up form can be found at www.dhrm.state.va.us.

Increased Laptop Use Poses Ergonomic Problems

Use of laptop computers has exploded in recent years, according to industry reports, doubling market share in four years.



Incorrect laptop usage



While laptops offer mobility without sacrificing noticeable performance, they do present ergonomic challenges for users. Aching backs, stiff necks and numbing of the hands can result from poor posture when using the mobile units.

“The laptop’s design, while excellent for portability, is not so successful for user comfort,” said Kristie McClaren, a loss control specialist with the Office of Workers’ Compensation in the Department of Human Resource Management.

“Often, laptops are used in undesirable positions, such as on the lap or on a work surface that is too high or too low,” she said. “Other design problems include small screens, awkward mouse and keyboard positions and an inability to adjust the height of the screen.

“The best way to reduce ergonomic complaints is through a neutral body position. Devices such as an external

keyboard and mouse can also help the user attain a more neutral position of the hands, wrists and neck, reducing common complaints associated with laptop use.”

Raise the laptop so that elbows are below the keyboard.

“Don’t Let Your Laptop Be A Pain,” a pamphlet developed for workers at the Kennedy Space Center

(<http://rehabworks.ksc.nasa.gov/pamphlets/Laptop.pdf>) provides some common sense suggestions on how to use a laptop to reduce strain on necks, arms and backs.

Some ideas include:

- If a docking station is not available, “raise laptops off the lap with phone books, towels, pillows, whatever’s handy.”
- Position the laptop high enough so there is a balance between the upper arms (arms should hang relaxed from the shoulder, with forearms nearly parallel to the floor) and the neck (the screen should be perpendicular to line of sight).
- Use palm or wrist rests and maintain a 90-degree angle between the upper arm and forearm.
- Don’t recline. The greater the recline, the more the head and neck are angled forward. As the pamphlet notes, “So no working in bed.”

Being Prepared Best Way To Weather Winter

Even though the calendar says spring is only a few weeks away, winter weather conditions can hit the Commonwealth when people least expect bad weather.

Knowing how to prepare for and cope with winter weather offers protection against the whims of nature. Here are some simple guidelines to remember when ice or snow – lots of it – is in the forecast.

Winter travel

- Fully check and winterize your vehicle. Check antifreeze early and often.
- Keep the vehicle's gas tank filled to prevent icing.
- Check road conditions. Call VDOT's 24-hour road condition hotline at 1-800-367-ROAD (7623) or log on to <http://virginiadot.org/comtravel/eoc/eoc-main.asp>
- Tell a friend about travel plans and timetables in the event of a delay.

An emergency winter storm survival kit is also recommended when traveling during inclement winter weather. Items recommended include: A container of sand or kitty litter; a shovel; windshield scraper; tow rope or chain; flashlight; high-energy foods; blankets; and heavy gloves.

Winter home safety checklist

As Hurricane Isabel taught millions of Virginians who went without power for several days, being prepared for the worst is the best strategy when dealing with the aftermath of a winter storm.

Virginia is particularly prone to ice storms that weigh down and snap power lines, leaving homes dark and cold. Have a ready supply of firewood for homes with fireplaces or a camp stove with fuel. Close off other rooms in the home and keep one room warm enough for basic comfort.

Other essentials are a battery-operated radio, extra batteries, a flashlight, first aid supplies, extra food, water, medicine and baby supplies and extra blankets. Dress warmly in layered clothing that can be removed to prevent perspiration.

Know weather warnings

A Winter Storm Watch means severe weather may be on the way.

A Winter Storm Warning means severe weather is definitely on the way.

A Blizzard Warning means large amounts of snow with winds over 35 mph are forecast.

Other resources

- ❑ For additional winter weather car tips go to <http://cartalk.cars.com/Info/WinterDriving/>
- ❑ For additional winter safety tips, visit <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/winter/index.shtml>

Identity Theft: How to Protect Your Good Name

By the Virginia Credit Union

Identity theft is the fastest growing consumer fraud activity in the United States, affecting millions of consumers annually. Unlike many other crimes, identity theft is a “quiet” crime.

If your car is stolen or home is burglarized, you know immediately that you have been a victim and you can take prompt action. However, if your identity is stolen, it may

take months or even years before you are aware that the crime has even been committed. Then you may have to spend years convincing creditors that you are not responsible for the fraudulent accounts acquired in your name.

What can you do to prevent this crime from invading your life? You must always be attentive to protecting your personal and financial information. Here are some ways you can do that.

Ways to reduce your risk

Clean out your wallet. Don't carry important documents like your Social Security card unless you absolutely need to.

Keep tabs on your credit cards. Limit the number of credit cards you carry. Always take your receipts home. Keep a separate list of the card numbers somewhere safe.

Watch your accounts. Check monthly statements carefully and report errors and discrepancies promptly. Think about closing unused accounts and putting a password or PIN on all accounts to get information via phone.

Choose PINs carefully. Choose PIN numbers for accounts and ATM cards that cannot be easily determined. Don't use your phone number, birth date, address, or Social Security number.

Be careful with your mail. Consider using a locked mailbox or a rented post office box. Don't leave bill payments out for your mail carrier to pick up.

Guard your personal information. Never give your personal information unless it's absolutely necessary. Ask how the person or company requesting the information intends to use it. Limit the information on personal checks to your name and address. Use a cross-cut or confetti shredder to shred receipts, paid bills and other documents before disposing of them.

What to do if you're a victim of identity theft

If you find you are a victim of identity theft, it's important to remain calm and take the necessary steps to clear your good name. Here are some of the things you should be prepared to do:

- Act quickly to minimize damage to your credit.
- Be prepared to be actively involved in resolving the problem.
- Report the crime to your local police, the Federal Trade Commission, the three main credit-reporting agencies (Equifax, TransUnion and Experian) and the creditors involved. Provide as much documented evidence as you can.
- Complete the ID Theft Affidavit available on the Federal Trade Commission website at <http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft>.
- Consider asking the credit reporting agencies to place a fraud alert in your file.

Be sure to discuss with them the effect this will have on your ability to legitimately obtain credit before making a final decision. You can also include a "victim's statement" in your file requiring that future credit applications be confirmed by you personally.

• Ask the creditors involved to send copies of all transactions, applications, statements and any other documents to you and your local police.

- Keep a detailed log of all correspondence and phone calls you make. Follow up phone calls in writing.

- Monitor your credit reports for several months or longer if you continue to see fraudulent accounts.

- If you are having difficulty resolving matters, consider hiring an attorney for legal representation.

Learn more about protecting yourself from and recovering from identity theft. Here are additional resources to help you protect your good name:

Virginia Credit Union: Take a short ID Theft Quiz to determine your likelihood of becoming an identity theft victim. Find links to other resources at:

www.vacu.org/education/security_privacy.asp and www.vacu.org/education/credit.asp.

Virginia Office of the Attorney General: Access and print the booklet, "How to Avoid Identity Theft - A Guide for Victims," at:

www.oag.state.va.us/PDF_files/IDTheftBook02.pdf or request a hard copy by e-mailing cybercrime@oag.state.va.us.

Volume 10, Number 3 – Winter 2004

Sara Redding Wilson

Director

Mike Salster

Editor

Anne Waring, Ann Black, Kristie McClaren, Virginia Credit Union

Contributors



E-mail comments to msalster@dhrm.state.va.us